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ABSTRACT

An evaluation focused on an analysis of the policy, procedures, and methods for the assessment of students in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and Senior Colleges in Queensland, Australia. A multiple case study methodology was used. Data were collected from a literature review, college visits, visits to other TAFE authorities, group discussions with industry representatives, submissions from TAFE and Senior Colleges, and interviews. The courses selected included certificate, associate diploma, and noncertificate level programs; both apprenticeship and advanced trade courses were included. Findings indicated that a revised policy for internal assessment of students introduced into Queensland TAFE colleges in 1981 remained as current policy in the area of student assessment and moderation and needed to be updated following significant developments in vocational education and training. Colleges regarded the existing policy as a "procedures" rather than a "policy" document and were concerned that functions were imposed on them without appropriate structures for implementing the functions. (Contains 15 references.) (YLB)

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ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS IN TAFE COLLEGES: MAINTENANCE OF STANDARDS IN INTERNALLY ASSESSED SUBJECTS

Paper presented at the 1991 annual conference of the
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Introduction

Assessment is the gathering of evidence, and the making of judgements based on that evidence, about individual students according to an agreed set of rules or standards (Thompson & Pearce, 1990). These standards may be criterion referenced or norm referenced or a combination of both. In the **Assessment Guidelines for Colleges of TAFE, Queensland** (Technical and Further Education, 1981) assessment is defined as a continuous process which involves both measurement and the making of judgements on the basis of the information which measurement has provided. Assessment methods in a course may include a combination of one or more of the following: formal examinations, practical work, a folio of work, assignments, projects or demonstrations, and oral assessment. Reform in the assessment of students to ensure quality learning outcomes in TAFE colleges is essential (Kirby, 1990). Reliable, accurate, and valid assessment practices can help colleges, business, industry, government, and the community advance towards local, state, and national goals.

Good assessment is an indispensable tool for skill formation, for personal and social skill development, for credentialling, and for the recognition of training across Australia. Assessment is important to students because it provides them with feedback about their learning achievement and leads to the attainment of credentials for use in obtaining employment, qualifying for further studies, gaining exemptions or advanced standing in other courses, or in gaining licences or membership of professional associations. Assessment is important to teachers because it provides them with feedback about student learning and confirms the adequacy of teaching strategies and resources. It has a diagnostic function so that appropriate measures can be taken. Assessment results are valuable in overall course evaluation and review, and eventually for monitoring the effectiveness of the large number of courses. Assessment is important to industry and employers because it ensures that graduates have achieved minimum standards acceptable to industry.

One of the ways of achieving quality of learning outcomes in TAFE colleges is though the assessment of students. Concerns for quality in vocational education and training have emerged as a theme in the provision of TAFE programs in recent years and improving the

quality of vocational training must be approached from several perspectives (Hayton et al., 1989). In TAFE, quality is associated with several major interrelated and interacting components such as organisation and management; curriculum planning, development, and delivery; the assessment of students; staff development; performance indicators; and student backgrounds. In order to provide a focus for this study, an emphasis has been placed on the assessment of students with regard to maintaining standards and consistency across TAFE colleges.

An award issued by a TAFE college based on internal assessment should have credibility irrespective of which college the student attended not only in Queensland but also throughout Australia. However, in Queensland, there are concerns that the existing assessment policy and procedures, the organisational structures and administrative approaches of different TAFE colleges, geographical locations, characteristics of students, qualifications and experiences of teachers, syllabus documents, accreditation processes, assessment requirements and practices, and access and equity of resources, may contribute to inconsistencies and variations in the overall standards of graduates across the TAFE colleges (Navaratnam, 1991). The possibility of variations emphasises the need for moderation, and has significance for the maintenance of standards across the system and on the quality of learning outcomes.

Purpose of the evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation was to evaluate the assessment policy and procedures in a sample of certificate, associate diploma, and non-certificate courses and their impact on maintaining standards across the TAFE colleges in Queensland. The specific objectives were:

i. To identify current policy and procedures in the assessment of students in the Queensland TAFE system;

ii. To identify existing methods of moderation and the maintenance of standards both within and across the TAFE colleges in Queensland; and

iii. To develop a strategy for maintaining consistency and standards in the assessment of students across the TAFE colleges in Queensland.

Methodology

This evaluation focussed on an analysis of the policy, procedures, and methods for the assessment of students in TAFE and Senior Colleges in Queensland. A multiple case study methodology (Yin, 1989) was used for this evaluation. Data for this evaluation were collected

from multiple sources: a literature review, college visits, visits to other TAFE authorities, group discussions with industry representatives, submissions from TAFE and Senior Colleges, interviews with personnel from the Division of Curriculum Design and Development and from Professional Development Branch. A reference group representing the Division of Curriculum Design and Development, Operational Performance, and country and metropolitan TAFE colleges was set up at the commencement of this review to advise on aspects of the evaluation.

The courses selected included certificate, associate diploma and non-certificate level programs. Both apprenticeship and advanced trade courses were included. Different types of courses were selected because teaching methods and assessment methods can vary from one course to another. Country and metropolitan colleges were selected because country colleges have a more restricted access to support and services from State Office. Consequently, assessment practices could differ and affect the quality of learning outcomes in country colleges in ways different from those in metropolitan colleges.

Information sought from college directors focussed on: current assessment policy and processes; the operation of College Assessment Committees; processes for moderating results and maintaining standards within courses and across colleges; participation in staff development activities; exemplary practices in the assessment of students; and suggestions to improve current assessment policy and procedures at the college level. Group discussions with teachers were conducted during the college visits. Course level information collected included: assessment methods; statements of standards of assessment; the participation of industry in assessment; the selection of content for assessment; inter-college co-operation; consistency among the accredited, taught, and assessed curriculum; methods for establishing consistency in assessment for the same course across the colleges; and suggestions for assessing the quality of learning in a course.

All TAFE colleges were requested to prepare submissions on the following topics: current policies and guidelines on the assessment of students, the operation of College Assessment Committees, moderation and maintenance of standards, competency-based assessment practices, and staff development activities on the assessment of students. A group of industry representatives nominated by the respective Associate Directors of fields of study from the Division of Curriculum Design and Development was invited to participate in a group discussion on quality learning issues in the TAFE context. The representatives were asked their opinions on the following: consistency and quality of teaching, consistency and quality of assessment, competency-based training, and other general issues of concern to industry as a whole. A brainstorming session was conducted to explore the major issues.

Draft reports prepared from information supplied by the above sources were returned to the sources for confirmation and comment and necessary changes were made in the reports based on the suggestions and advice received. Thus, the validity and reliability of the reports were confirmed. Discussions with personnel in the Division of Curriculum Design and Development and Professional Development Branch were made not only to gather information but also to verify the issues identified from the college visits and discussions with the industry representatives. Individual college reports were prepared and submitted to the reference group. Based on the progressive findings of the evaluation, major issues were identified by the reference group. Based on the issues identified, a strategy for maintaining consistency and standards in the assessment of students was developed by the steering committee.

Findings

College-Based Assessment of Students

Assessment by individual TAFE colleges in Queensland (internal assessment), known as College-Based Assessment (C-BAS) was initiated in 1978 and since then, student assessment has been further decentralised. TAFE colleges have become responsible and accountable for developing and conducting their own assessment of students in almost all fields of study, for all courses, at all levels of awards as well as cooperating with the Division of Curriculum Design and Development to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of assessment policies and practices. In this way, colleges devise and administer both summative and formative assessment instruments at the classroom level without the need to refer to any external agency. College staff evaluate the work of students, assign grades on the basis of assessment and issue awards when all the requirements of a course have been met. In fact, the aims of C-BAS assessment are to: (1) improve standards of assessment in colleges, (2) assist teachers in the area of student assessment, (3) ensure appropriateness, adequacy, consistency, and reasonable coverage between curriculum and assessment, and (4) ensure a fair assessment of students.

With the introduction of the C-BAS policy, an exception was made to conduct central assessment for certain subjects. At present, central assessment is conducted only for those courses that involve licensing by other agencies such as the Electrical Contractors and Licensing Board of the Department of Mines and Energy; the Division of Accident Prevention of the Department of Employment, Vocational Education, Training and Industrial Relations; and the Plumbers and Drainers Examination and Licensing Board of the Department of Water Resources. The agencies have a legislative authority to license graduates so that they can be employed in

their trade areas. They also have a role in the curriculum design and in the assessment of students. The Division of Curriculum Design and Development is responsible for ensuring that centrally assessed subjects are adequately prepared by examiners and that they are developed in accordance with the specifications and standards set by the licensing agencies.

In order to support the C-BAS process, the TAFE colleges were encouraged to establish College Assessment Committees (CAC). It was envisaged that as these CACs took a more active role in the college evaluation of assessment instruments, assessment would continue to improve, and the formal mechanisms for improvement and accountability would be strengthened (Mitchell, 1981). The responsibilities of the CACs as outlined in the **Assessment Guidelines for Colleges of TAFE, Queensland** (1981) included the following (p.55): (i) to review assessment instruments prepared by college staff; (ii) to review peer assessment instruments supplied by the Division of Curriculum Design and Development and to make objective comparisons and comments on them; (iii) to coordinate activities with the Division of Curriculum Design and Development by forwarding assessment instruments prepared by college staff each semester; (iv) to supply examination results to Examinations Branch promptly; and (v) to disseminate assessment related information to college staff and support them in the preparation and production of assessment instruments.

Maintenance of standards and consistency

According to C-BAS policy, the Division of Curriculum Design and Development is responsible for maintaining standards and consistency in all forms of assessment across the TAFE system through two forms of evaluation each year: (i) the Division of Curriculum Design and Development evaluations, and (ii) college-based peer evaluations. The Division of Curriculum Design and Development is required to evaluate a 5% sample of C-BAS assessment instruments in various subjects from the preceding examination period with respect to their overall suitability, consistency with the approved syllabus, and comparability across colleges. The Division of Curriculum Design and Development is also responsible for facilitating college-based peer evaluations for another 5% sample of examination papers or instruments for a selected group of subjects. According to Mitchell (1981), the purpose of the evaluations of assessment instruments by the Division of Curriculum Design and Development and college peers is to: (1) improve standards, assist teachers, and facilitate the conduct of valid and reliable assessment; (2) produce a 100 to 1000 word commentary on each assessment instrument; and (3) encourage direct communication among the authors of the assessment instruments. The matters to be considered in these evaluations include: format/presentation, instructions to students, guidance to markers, weighting of marks, appropriateness of instrument, question

suitability, coverage of subject content, degree of difficulty, question construction, completion time, and purpose. Thus, these two types of evaluations are scheduled to be conducted each semester and reported annually by the Division of Curriculum Design and Development to give guidance on assessment to teachers and to maintain assessment standards in vocational education and training.

College directors have major responsibilities for the conduct of internal assessment in order to ensure its effectiveness and to maintain standards at the college level. The major responsibilities include the following (Mitchell, 1981): (i) to ensure that assessments of all internally assessable subjects prepared by the college staff are appropriate, adequate, accountable, acceptable, fair, and consistent; (ii) to review assessment instruments prepared by other colleges and provide objective comparisons and comments in consultation with other staff; and (iii) to coordinate activities with the Division of Curriculum Design and Development in forwarding assessment instruments and preparing and submitting examination papers for any centrally conducted assessment when and if required.

Strategy for maintaining standards and consistency

This evaluation revealed that the current C-BAS procedures need to be revised for a variety of reasons. Some of the major issues include:

* the development of a major role in assessing and certifying the attainment of on-the-job and off-the-job competencies along with the associated legal/industrial relations implications;
* the formalisation of articulation arrangements with higher education institutions;
* the progress towards a national approach to the determination of training standards and certification requirements;
* the assessment of competencies acquired rather than time spent on training as a basis for certification;
* the balance between core competencies developed nationally and training designed to meet individual company requirements;
* the recognition (and assessment) of prior learning; and
* Freedom-of-Information legislation.

As a result of the above developments, State Office policy needs to be revised to take account of the changing requirements and staff development programs need to be conducted to enable teachers to handle the changes more appropriately.

In the smaller TAFE colleges in the country it is frequently the case that there is only one specialist teacher in each of the different subject areas. This means that there might be no other teacher at the college who is able to offer advice on training and assessment issues in a particular subject area. The establishment of teacher networks across colleges to share problems and the identification of specialist or master teachers who can provide advice needs to be developed more strenously. College Assessment Committees need work more rigorously in this regard.

The ramifications arising from Freedom-of-Information legislation are not clear but it has been TAFE policy not to release a student's marks nor return examination scripts. Only the overall grades have been provided. A legal challenge recently in Victoria concerning the release of marks was ruled in favour of the student. While this issue is not related to the quality of assessment there may be a need to document student assessments in greater detail and thus there may be an increase in administration requirements.

During the process of developing a strategy for maintaining standards and consistency in the assessment of students across the colleges, the reference group considered the above identified issues as they related to the effective implementation of C-BAS policy. A strategy was suggested for the establishment of a quality standing committee within the TAFE system at the state level. This committee should have representatives from the areas of curriculum, professional development, operational performance, and the TAFE colleges. The strategy emphasises the separation of developmental activities associated with learning outcomes from monitoring activities while maintaining coordination between them. A range of groups would have responsibility for the tasks identified by the coordinating body. The strategy indicated that the initial focus of the reference group should, however, be on the assessment of students.

Summary and conclusion

In 1981 a revised policy for internal assessment of students was introduced into Queensland TAFE colleges. This policy which remains as current Bureau policy in the area of student assessment and moderation needs to be updated following significant developments in vocational education and training. The existing C-BAS policy is regarded by colleges as a

"procedures" rather than a "policy" document and the colleges are concerned that functions are imposed on them without appropriate structures for implementing the functions.

The Queensland TAFE system is currently supporting major curriculum developments focusing on competency-based training. Employers and employer associations will pay particular attention to these developments and to assessment standards. In recent years, the integration of the TAFE sector with other forms of education has grown and become more formalised. TAFE subjects are listed on senior certificates, results and awards are compared between the secondary and TAFE sectors, and TAFE courses articulate into diplomas and degrees offered by other tertiary institutions. Thus other educational agencies have a vested interest in TAFE curriculum, standards and assessment practices. Even the industrial audience has become more concerned about assessment procedures and practices. For example, the Master Builder's Association conducts practical tests on graduates of prevocational courses and makes comparisons between the graduate's TAFE results and performance on its tests as well as making comparisons between the results assigned by different colleges. By considering the all issues, maintenance of standards in internally assessed subjects is vital important to keep pace with the national initiatives occurring in vocational education and training in Australia.

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